Title: Winter Landscape with Bird Trap
Artist: Pieter Bruegel
Year Painted: 1565
Medium: Oil

Background Information

No one really knows for sure when Pieter Bruegel was born... it could have been anywhere between 1525 and 1530. There is nothing known at this point about his early childhood— who his parents were, or if he had any siblings. He was born in an area of Europe that became part of Holland. He might have been born in the town of Breda, near the North Sea coast, but no one is certain of that, either. Perhaps one day an old document, such as a letter, will be found that will help solve some of these mysteries.

It is known, however, that he was a master painter and that he became famous during his lifetime. He painted pictures of ordinary people working in the field or playing games and dancing. No other artist had painted such things before.

At some point, probably in his twenties, Bruegel went to live in Antwerp, a big city in present-day Belgium. In Antwerp he studied with Pieter Coecke. Coecke was a well-known artist who owned a busy workshop. Many apprentices, or students, worked there. It was where they trained to become artists. Bruegel became one of Pieter Coecke’s apprentices. He traveled to Italy to study painting there for a while. He later married Coecke’s daughter and moved to Brussels. Together they had two sons who also became artists, but they did not have quite the talent of their father.

In Bruegel’s time most paintings were made on flat pieces of wood called panels. Bruegel probably learned how to cover a panel with coats of chalk mixed with glue. When the surface of the panel was completely smooth and white all over, it was ready to be painted on. Bruegel painted using oil paints.

He painted such detail. Often, at first glance, his paintings appear to have very few colors. They seem to have an overall brown or gray or dark yellow color. But if you look closely, you’ll be surprised to see that he used lots of bright reds, blues, greens, and even pinks. Many experts think that Breugel may have put important secret messages in his paintings; messages that only he and a few others knew about. Sometimes these paintings included strange and frightening symbols and messages. He disguised the messages in some of his paintings because he lived during a very dangerous time. If you offended the wrong person, you could get into real trouble.
What kind of painting is this: a portrait or a landscape?

a landscape

Even though there are many human figures in the painting, what dominates or takes up the most space?

The town and sky

Bruegel appears to have divided his canvas into section. What part appears closest to us?

The bushes, bird trap and trees

Who remembers the art term for this?

Foreground

How does Bruegel make it seem closer?

There is much more detail
The objects are proportionally larger

If you were going to walk into this painting, where would you enter?

Lower right

What is the second tier or middle ground of this painting?

The people ice skating, some of the town

Where is this area placed on the canvas?

Lower left ¼ of the painting

How does Bruegel emphasize this middle ground of the painting?

With more color

How do the sizes of the figures compare to those in the foreground?

They are much smaller (you can use a ruler to illustrate)

Which part of the painting is farthest away from us?

Another town, other landscape

What do we call the most distant part of a painting?

The background

How does Bruegel indicate the distance of the town?

We see the haze of atmosphere
There is much less detail
The background is in the upper ½ of the painting

What shape do you see repeated most often?

Triangles of the rooflines
What time of year do you think it is?
Winter

How can you tell?
Snow, no leaves on trees,

Can you feel the chill in the air?
Yes, grey haze makes it feel cold.

What are some on the activities the people are doing?
Skating, Ice fishing.

Most of Breugel’s first paintings were landscaped. He combined the scenery near his home with the mountains and valleys he remembered from his trip to Italy. Breugel was very interested in landscapes but he also enjoyed painting people. He added more people to his works as time went on.

What colors does the artist use?
When people look at a Pieter Bruegel painting they often think he used very few colors. At first glance his pictures seem to be an overall brown, grey, yellow. But if you look closely, you’ll be surprised to find that Bruegel used lots of reds, blues, greens and even pinks.

For the older children:
You can compare contrast to Bruegel’s “The Harvesters.”
(in the office closest.)

For the younger children:
Let’s play “I Spy.”

Can you find 8 people wearing red?
Can you find a boat?
Can you find a fishing hole in the ice?
Can you find a bird trap?